

The first Burmese man Larkin meets with has a fortune: 1,000 books, each one wrapped individually.

of Emma Larkin's book to know that I needed more background in Orwell before I borrowed it again, so I ordered *Burmese Days*. Larkin's claim is that *Burmese Days*, *Animal Farm*, and *1984* form a trilogy about modern Burma. But what stuck in my head, from those first pages, was the fragile conditions for books in a tropical country of readers. The first Burmese man Larkin meets with has a fortune: 1,000 books, each one wrapped individually and kept in trunks as insurance against mold and the march of paper-hungry insects.

John Flory, the protagonist in *Burmese Days*, who is isolated in a far-flung post at the edge of the jungle, says *the need to talk is the greatest of all needs*. We understand him to mean the kind of talk where there is a meeting of minds. He is deprived of any of it by the remoteness and the rot that eats away, like book-eating tropical insects, at the foundations of Britain's imperialist project. Talking was something we were denied, Allan and I, as he swept up on the shores of pain and receded again. All the apparatus of oxygen and flexible tube and high silver barricades of the hospital bed robbed us of the proximity that coaxes intimate conversation. *Burmese Days* trifled with my nonfiction-reading streak. It was the first novel in months. It sneaked in because it had to, and that made me both sad and happy.

Michael went to the hospital every day. He could be counted on to choose the right books, and brought Allan "crap" (his word) to read because the medications made it impossible for Allan to wrap his mind around theory. But he did want Basho. His wife was dispatched, and then his

sister, to search the house for the volume of Basho he had just bought. A new edition or translation. But where was it? His house is up in the hills, a three-bedroom ski-chalet-like place, big enough, or nearly so, for his 14,000 books. In a bathroom closet are piles of poetry. In the shed, where the boxes are neatly categorized, one carton I noticed is labeled "male beat poets." In the back room, meant by anyone else to be their master bedroom, his homemade bookcases on every available wall are filled several levels deep. The books that don't fit on shelves, in stacked, loaded boxes, are devoted to analytical philosophy, liberation studies, ethnic and racial theory, literary criticism, music and art, cultural studies, Jewish thought. Every book written by Alain Badiou—and anyone else, for that matter—Allan has. I wasn't sure who Badiou was as I read his name on spine after spine. "No one left out. No one left behind," is Allan's approach to his social justice work. It's the phrase in the signature of every e-mail he sends from his health education office on campus. He reads like that too.

I spied a Geertz title I didn't know on a high shelf in the guest room closet—several anthropology books by and about Geertz, in fact. Allan told me to read Geertz's "Deep Play" when I was busily uncovering the story of Emily Dickinson's maid. I don't know, even after finishing the article, if I fully understand how it related to what I was working on, but I was glad to have been pushed out and beyond. In this room and every other room, everything is stacked or boxed or shelved in findable categories. He knows where everything is. Except Basho.

The fourteenth floor of the hospital is where you go to die. Lita died there on a Wednesday morning at 4:00 a.m., peacefully, while her husband repeated the names of everyone who loved her. The list was inexhaustible. There, too, Allan came quietly into a room, and slipped away from us. It was the middle of the night. His wife and sister were asleep beside him when that indomitable spirit lifted and left. At 2:00 a.m. we raced back to the hospital we'd departed from four hours earlier.

A week later Michael and I spent the day with Allan's books. Friends had come and taken some of them, but not the esoteric stuff—the deep, dense books where his mind had once dwelled happily. In his living room shelves I came across *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* by Colleen McDannell, and was de-

DANIELLA WOOLF

Cut Out 4397, 2013

Journaling, Watercolor and Cut Paper, 8.5 x 11 in

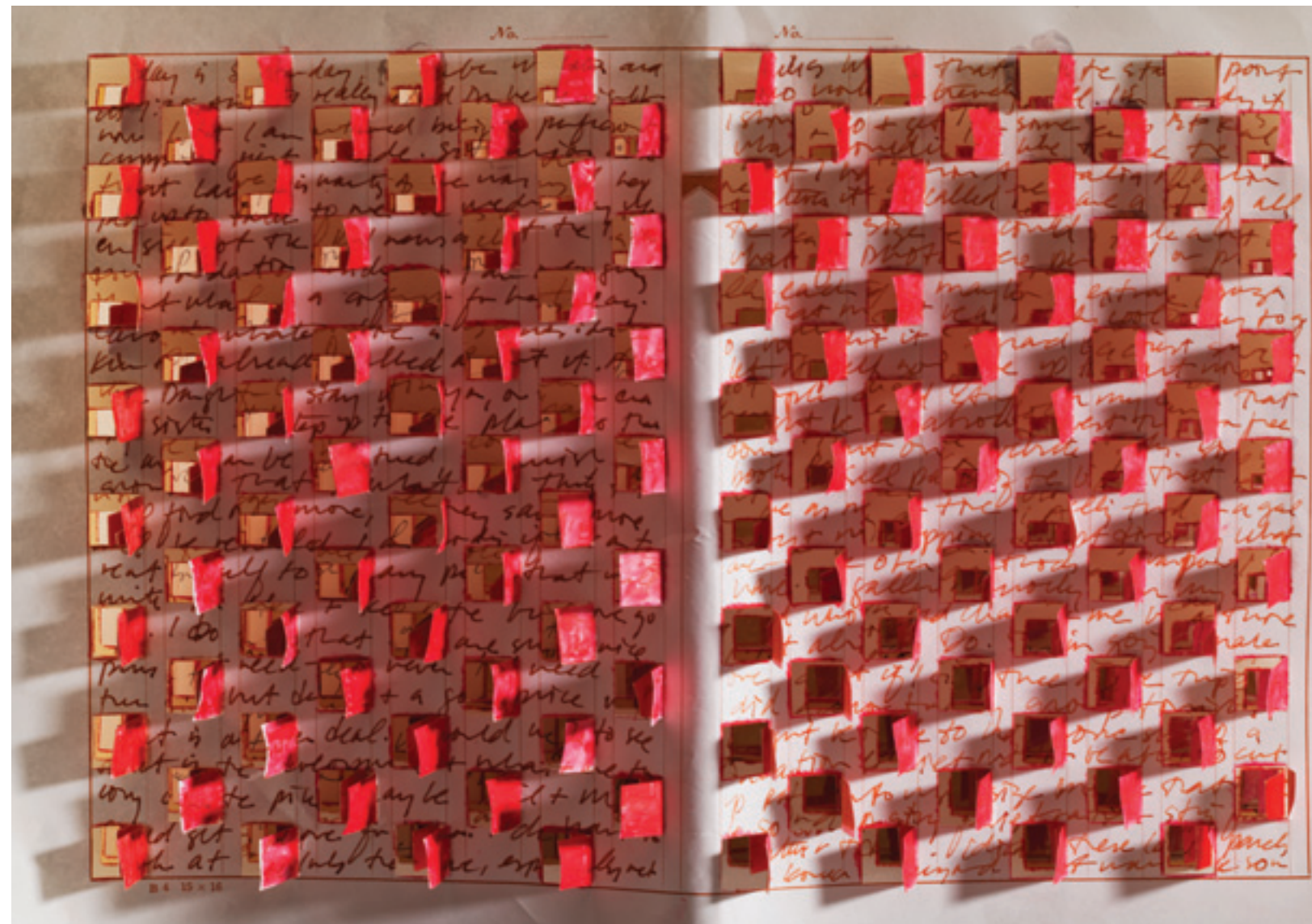


PHOTO: RR JONES